



Thousands of contracts, millions of jobs

BY STAFF , [INSIGHT NEWS](#)

June 02, 2008

Van Jones is the founder and president of Green for All, a national organization working to get “green collar” jobs and opportunities to disadvantaged communities. In an interview last week with Insight News, Jones said, “We have to move into a greener economy. Oil is past tense. Coal is past tense. All of that stuff is too negative to keep using. We have to keep moving into something more clean and green. Billions of dollars are already flowing in that direction. We want to make sure that there is an equal opportunity and an equal access agenda. We don’t want to build a green economy that is a white only economy or an eco-elite only economy,” he said.

“We want to have a green economy that includes us, that lifts people out of poverty and provides pathways to prosperity for people who need new jobs, who need new hope, who need new investment, and who need new opportunity,” he said.

“So we decided to make that our platform as Green for All.”

Jones founded the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, CA. The agency works to get kids out of jail and into jobs. The mission is restorative justice—making sure that when young people get in trouble they get the help they need to get out of trouble and out of the harm, he said.

“But I burned out doing that work. I spent a lot of time going to funerals, a lot of time at prison, a lot of time with mothers or grandmothers who were waiting in long lines, not to touch and hold their child, but to just put their hand on the plexiglass between them and their child in the detention facility. I got burned out on that. It was too much for me,” said Jones.

“I discovered the over the bridge, in a place called Marin County there was a whole other scene [from Oakland] right over the horizon, with organic food and solar panels and hybrid cars and green lifestyle that was making people involved in it a lot of money.

“I come back across the bridge wondering, ‘What is this? Eco- apartheid?’”

Jones said he decided that that was not going to be acceptable. “I came into it more from the economic opportunity side and the investment side and decided we can start weatherizing homes so people can pay less money on their energy bills. We can put our children to work getting our young people the tools and training and technology to install solar panels, to weatherize buildings, to get involved in green construction,” he said.

“I thought it was really important that those of us from the African American community and other communities of color really embrace this agenda and also expand it. And that’s what we’ve been doing. We have great partners including the Blue Green Alliance, the Sierra Club, and other organizations that up until now haven’t worked together closely,” he said.

More and more people see that working for an inclusive green economy can lift people out of poverty and save the planet at the same time, Jones said.

“Connecting the people who most need work with the work that most needs to get done, is a common ground agenda for everybody,” he said.

Jones’ was accompanied by Dave Foster, of the Blue Green Alliance, and Kathy Duval, national political director of Sierra Club, the most well known environmental advocacy organization in the country. The interview at the Marcus Garvey House, Insight News’ North Minneapolis headquarters, included Environmental Justice Advocates of Minnesota (EJAM) organizer Karen Monahan; EJAM volunteer Rachel Dykoski; and Trayshana Thomas, Executive Assistant for U.S. Rep. Keith Ellison. Eight-year-old Harvest Preparatory School student, Isaiah Howard, our grandson, opened the interview with a question to Jones.

“What do you think we should do about the environment?” Howard asked. “How should

we keep it clean? We should not let people fill it up with garbage.”

“The most important thing is that you recognize how much power you have as a young person,” Jones said to Howard. “When things are clean and neat and healthy, everybody is a lot happier. Everybody gets along better. When things get yucky and dirty, nobody’s happy. If you say, ‘let’s not throw stuff on the ground and dirty up the neighborhood, and, let’s not throw bottles into the street just to break them,’ stuff that might be fun but then later on might hurt somebody— if you have that kind of attitude, other young people will follow you. You can be a leader and keep the community clean and safe. This is your community and how it looks reflects on you. It is really up to you. You want people to come to your neighborhood and say, ‘Wow this is a beautiful neighborhood.’ You can keep it that way.”

Insight asked Jones to explore the perception that the environmentalism movement is not connecting with our experience as Africans in the New World. “The popular perception of an environmentalist is the person who complains about the toxins in the water and who wants to save the whales, but not concerned policies and barriers to my being able to get a job or keep a job, take care of my kids, pay my light bill, or pay my taxes. So my sole focus as a Black person may be on the stress of living day by day. How do I take time to hear a message about something esoteric like the environment? How do we get our people to embrace and understand our ownership of the environment?” we asked Jones.

“I think we have to be clear from a historical perspective. How did respect for the earth become something that is 100% wholly owned subsidiary of white folks? Where did that come from?”

He said, “Historically, African and indigenous families honored the earth, respected the earth. When the colonizer came the colonizer said, ‘We’re going to bulldoze this and chop this down.’ After a while, we said, ‘Hold it! You can’t just come and knock all this stuff over. It’s supposed to be like this. The Creator didn’t make mistakes!’ And the colonizers said, ‘You worship rocks and trees. You worship rivers and stones. You are heathens. We have to civilize you. We have to educate you to understand that these are resources. These are not animals, these are pelts. Those are not trees, its lumber. We have to civilize you to understand that these things are not sacred.’ Now three hundred years of doing it that way, we see the consequences,” Jones said.

“The reality is that a green agenda is not a white agenda. It is rainbow agenda. People all over the world including Europe have known for centuries, for millennia, that all life is connected and we have a central role as human beings to interact in a way that shows good stewardship. The people in Europe who were taught that way and believed in that way, were also called heathens and witches and burned at the stake because somebody had a better way to do everything.

“People around the world can point back to a time when they had a much more sane relationship to the earth and it’s been a very short time that we have been moving in another direction. But the idea that now that we are trying to move back is “white doesn’t make any sense. We’re moving back to the sensibility of our own great-grandparents who knew a lot better. This adolescent rebellion of the whole human family against our mother, the Earth, is coming to an end.

And that’s an all people’s agenda. If you want to make a case, you can certainly make a case for Africans and indigenous people to say that this is something that is not alien to us. Secondly, the people who suffer the most from environmental harm are poor people, people of color, people who work in environments where there are toxins,” said Jones.

“Not only do we get hit the worst by all the negatives of the pollution in the environment, but as we look forward to tomorrow, we are ironically in danger of benefiting last and least for all the positive things that are coming,” he said. “Tomorrow green industry is coming. Tomorrow wind is coming. Organic food, healthy food is coming. Green chemistry is coming. Green manufacturing is coming, and if we say that is not our agenda, all those jobs, all that wealth building, all that healthy improvement will then be in somebody else’s hands and we’ll be mad tomorrow and say, ‘Why did you leave me out?’” he said.

“I would argue that today is the time for us to honor our past and say these are everybody’s values, certainly our own, deal with the pain of today and say, ‘We don’t want this to be the pain of our children and our grandchildren.’ Let’s do something different to honor the earth and our community and look at tomorrow and say, rather than continuing to knock on the closed door of a pollution based economy that dishonors people and the planet, continuing to beg for jobs there, why don’t we co-create a green economy that is inclusive, that honors and values our grandparents, that honors the future of our grandchildren and work hand and hand with the labor movement, with the environmental movement, with the progressive business community to build a new

future," said Jones.

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